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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000261

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: S/P DIRECTOR SLAUGHTER RAISES HALKI SEMINARY WITH THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH

REF: (A) ISTANBUL 140 (B) ISTANBUL 231 (C) ISTANBUL 243

Classified By: ConGen Istanbul Acting Pol/Econ section chief geoff odlu m; reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Visiting S/P Director met June 25 in Istanbul with the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, to discuss religious freedom and interfaith dialogue in Turkey. The Patriarch again praised President Obama's April 6 Ankara speech remarks on the need to re-open the Halki Seminary and welcomed Turkish Minister for EU Affairs Bagis's recent positive comments on the same issue, but noted that "the Turkish Government has never discussed it with us, and Halki is still closed." Dr. Slaughter noted that a positive move on Halki could be reinforced with an interfaith dialogue event attended by a senior US official. The Patriarch strongly agreed that tying the two together might be a successful inducement for the GOT. He reviewed the Patriarchate's active interfaith dialogue efforts, and noted he will travel to the U.S. (including Washington) in October for a religious and scientific symposium. He also recalled the European Court of Human Rights' 2008 decision that Turkey must return the confiscated Buyukada Orphanage to the Patriarchate, but noted that Turkey has made no effort yet to do so and may yet appeal the decision. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Visiting S/P Director Anne-Marie Slaughter, accompanied by S/P staff member Dean Pittman, Istanbul Acting Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk, and Pol/Econ notetaker, met in Istanbul June 25 with the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, and Patriarchate staff for an overview discussion of the challenges confronting the Ecumenical Church.

Previewing the Patriarchate's Concerns

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¶3. (C) Immediately prior to the audience with the Patriarch, Patriarchate representatives Paul Gikas and Deacon Nephron previewed for S/P Director Slaughter the key issues and priorities facing the Patriarchate. They explained that the Patriarchate is constrained by a lack of formal dialogue with the GOT resulting from the Patriarchate's lack of Turkish legal identity, and thus is limited to communicating with the GOT by sending letters and issuing statements which largely go unanswered. Asked who might be a useful interlocutor, Gikas identified Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs, Egemen Bagis, as someone with whom the Patriarch feels comfortable. Oudkirk noted that Bagis had recently been quoted telling the European press that re-opening the Halki Seminary (closed since 1971) was an international human rights issue, not just a domestic Turkish issue. Deacon Nephron described the overall attitude of the GOT towards the Patriarchate, however, as one of neglect. "Turkey wouldn't mind seeing the Ecumenical Patriarchate die off." They noted that Turkey refuses to recognize the "ecumenical" nature of the church, and refuses to allow the church to take basic steps to ensure

its survival, steps that are becoming critically important as the church community has dwindled to under 3,000 members, according to Gikas.

¶4. (C) We asked the Patriarchate staff whether allowing Turkey's higher education board (YOK) to manage a re-opened Halki Seminary offered a possible solution. They explained that YOK's regulations would impose legal rules incompatible with the Church's requirements, for example on the Church's requirement that only male students may study in the seminary, and on dress code requirements for seminarians (ref B). YOK might also limit the Patriarchate's ability to hire teachers of its choice. The Patriarchate staff also described the restrictions Turkey imposes on the election of the Patriarch, requiring that the "hierarchs" (the electors) must be Turkish citizens. Currently there are 55 ecumenical "hierarchs", but only 14 of them are Turkish citizens. The Patriarchate fears that as the current group of Turkish electors ages and passes away, Turkish legal restrictions may prevent the church from being able to identify enough electors to elect a future Patriarch. The staff also briefed Slaughter on the Church's property disputes with Turkey, including the Buyukada Orphanage, which the European Court of Human Rights decided in July 2008 should be returned to the Patriarchate's control. According to Gikas, Turkey has so far ignored that ruling. Deacon Nephron noted that confiscated properties have provided the Turkish government with a generous source of rental income, funds which the Patriarchate believes belongs to the church.

Audience with the Patriarch

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¶5. (C) The Patriarch welcomed S/P Director Slaughter's visit and offered appreciation to President Obama for taking the time to meet with him in Istanbul on April 7. He said he hopes to see the President and Secretary Clinton when the Patriarch travels to Washington in October, noting his understanding that the Secretary has offered to host a dinner for him at the State Department. He also asked Dr. Slaughter to pass on his wishes to the Secretary for a speedy recovery of her broken elbow.

¶6. (C) Dr. Slaughter asked the Patriarch's views about the President's June 6 Cairo speech and prospects for inter-faith dialogue in this region, including with the Patriarchate's participation. The Patriarch praised the President's Cairo speech and outlined the Patriarchate's multi-faceted efforts at interfaith outreach, including conferences it has organized over the past year in Athens and Brussels, and the Patriarch's own travels to Libya, the Gulf states, and Iran (where he said he was welcomed warmly by Iran's Minister for Religious Guidance). He will participate in a dialogue between Jewish and Orthodox Christian leaders in Athens soon, and looks forward to participating in a dialogue with Muslim leaders (including Prince Hassan from Jordan) at a global environmental and ecological symposium in Mississippi in October that will bring together "many leaders from the world's religious and scientific communities."

Re-opening Halki

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¶7. (C) The Patriarch asked Dr. Slaughter to thank the President again for including in his Ankara speech on April 6 a call on the Turkish government to re-open the Halki Seminary, and for being a forceful advocate for Turkish accession to the EU. The Patriarch said he supports Turkish accession strongly (although he said he is criticized in Greece for taking this position), because it would bring stability to the region and promote deeper Christian-Muslim understanding.

¶8. (C) S/P Director Slaughter asked whether Turkey might be

more inclined to re-open Halki if the re-opening was linked to an inter-faith dialogue event at Halki in which a senior US official might participate. The Patriarch agreed such an event would make the re-opening significantly more appealing to Turkey. The Patriarch would like to invite PM Erdogan to attend any future re-opening as well, to send a signal of respect for minority rights.

¶19. (C) The Patriarch felt the USG and EU were both playing a helpful role in keeping the spotlight on religious freedom issues in Turkey. He noted that Egemen Bagis's comments in Brussels about the Halki Seminary as a human rights issue were among the most promising he had heard from a Turkish official in some time. He compared that to the last time he raised Halki with PM Erdogan, claiming Erdogan's reply was to counter that there were no mosques (at that time) in Athens. The Patriarch had explained that he had no control over the Greek government's handling of religious matters. "In any event, now Athens has a mosque, but still Halki is still closed." The Patriarch described Halki's re-opening as "a need, not a luxury. The future of the Patriarchate depends on it. We need younger members, younger leaders, a younger Synod, and they need to be trained at Halki."

¶10. (C) The Patriarch noted that he had discussed scenarios for re-opening Halki with former GOT Minister of Education Celik, proposing to form a mixed oversight commission of YOK and Patriarchate representatives, but the GOT did not pursue this proposal. He detailed a history of efforts by the USG to secure GOT agreement to re-open Halki, including by former President Clinton, former Ambassador Mark Parris, and others, which appeared to bring the issue to the cusp of a positive resolution, "but always in the end the Turkish Government couldn't agree." The Patriarchate said he had not yet taken the issue to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), because "we first want to try every possible step we can within Turkey. But we won't wait more than 40 years." (Comment: Halki has been closed for 38 years.) Asked if the Patriarchate would like USG assistance to develop a more effective channel of direct communications and dialogue with the GOT on the Halki issue, the Patriarch replied that while that would be helpful "we'd rather that they just re-open the seminary."

Communicating with the GOT

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¶11. (C) The Patriarch described relations with the GOT as stable. He had met twice in past years with PM Erdogan, and after the last elections with President Gul and Speaker Toptan. He explained the Patriarch's priorities to Gul and Toptan (Halki, Patriarchate succession, confiscated property) and shared with them a Patriarchate nonpaper detailing those issues. "They seemed sympathetic, but we haven't found any concrete solutions to those issues yet."

Buyukada Orphanag

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¶12. (C) The Patriarch noted the ECHR's 2008 unanimous ruling ("even the Turkish judge") on the Buyukada Orphanage property, recognizing the Patriarchate's legal claim to that property. The Patriarchate is waiting for a follow-up, technical ruling from the ECHR on whether Turkey is obliged to return the property or should pay appropriate compensation, given that the property is in a decrepit state, a ruling expected by the end of the year. Even then, Turkey may appeal the ruling, so the Patriarch does not expect closure to this issue for some time. In the meantime, the Patriarchate sent a team of architects in late June to Buyukada to study the orphanage's construction ("It is Europe's largest wooden building"), with the aim of evaluating and publicizing the poor state of the building and the need for comprehensive renovations.

Comment

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¶13. (C) The Patriarchate's challenges with the GOT remain largely the same, but so does its strong stance on the only "acceptable" formula for the reopening of Halki Seminary. The Patriarchate's inflexibility at a time when GOT officials are speaking so uncharacteristically positively about reopening Halki may mean that they are willing to sacrifice the opening of seminary rather than adapt to also instruct nuns (for example). While the Patriarchate contends that they have received no official communication from the GOT on the topic of Halki, nor has the Patriarchate reached out to the GOT officially on the topic in the last year (according to the Patriarchate itself). For the USG, it may be useful to press Turkey to open a formal and ongoing dialogue with the Patriarchate on the range of issues that concern it. In addition, offering Turkey high-level and high-profile USG support for an interfaith dialogue in conjunction with reopening Halki may resonate. However, the Patriarchate may need to show greater flexibility in its definition of an "acceptable" formula. End Comment.

¶14. (U) S/P Director Slaughter has reviewed this cable.

WIENER